

The walls that divide us

Psalm 80:1-2,8-9; Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 12:49-56

Rev J Shannon

There's a lot of walls and a lot of grapes in these readings. Walls have been significant through the ages. In this case the writers talk about the walls being breached and the fruit stolen...as a metaphor for Israel surrounded by enemies.

It is interesting that as civil society unravels in the USA, people are moving into 'gated' communities. People feel unsafe so they are trying to put up walls around their little vineyard to keep the ugliness out.

It was disturbing that as my cousin's apartment was on the 3rd floor, we could see over the walls. Beyond the green lawns, pools and fountains was the wreckage of the trailer park next door. The view from her back balcony was wetlands and ocean, the view from her front down below: manicured lawns; over the fence, broken portable houses, car bodies and kids' toys stuck in the mud. It was a walled island of desolation and hopelessness next to a garden of Eden.

Israel was, and continues to be, surrounded by enemies. Constantly under threat.

In ancient times wars between nations were seen as wars between their Gods. (There was plenty to choose from) They would claim it was never about land or profits...God told us to do it. If your side lost, then clearly your God was not as powerful as the other – or you would have to come up with an alternative explanation (alternative truth?) like perhaps your God was punishing your people for something. It was on this justification that the Hillsborough Church picketed veterans' funerals on the basis that deaths in Afghanistan were paying for the sins in America – so it's not such an ancient idea after all. Think back, in Old Testament terms, how many times God is mentioned in the battles throughout the centuries.

Politics and religion are a terrible mixture as we know from our own family dinner-table dingdongs.

This week's quote from Donald Trump strongly supports this position.

"The tyrants we are fighting do not stand even a little chance because we are Americans and Americans kneel to God and God alone".

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Back to Psalm 80 – its sounds a lot like God is withholding warmth as an incentive for humankind's self-reflection. The end of the Psalm begs for a hug..."Let your hand rest on the man you have raised up for yourself..." (17) I'll leave it to you to decide whether this is a successful technique.

Israel wants to return to the Garden where the vines can thrive and the walls protect. God needs to change.

Jesus says God is consistent – it's *you* that must change...and he gives us no illusions that this will be easy. For those who love the peace and loving Jesus, this is a hard passage to follow.

From the beginning of Luke, the Jesus story is centered on promises of peace. We've talked about God's plan for the reconciliation of all things again and again but here, we are acknowledging that division is inevitable.

Disciples, both now and then, are eager for an instant peace, a trouble-free fulfillment of the promised salvation. Jesus words here are very disturbing.

But to follow the cross is hard. To speak for justice is hard. *Four Corners* did a program about whistle-blowers in the United Nations bureaucracy. It was a tragic story about an institution set up for good that began to feel unassailable because of domestic immunity. With no one looking in, it cultivated a toxic culture of corruption, nepotism and sexual harassment. Whistle-blowers have either left or suffered a campaign against their integrity, and even their sanity, until they were fired.²

There is no peace without conflict. No salvation without rejection.

Division is inevitable. Even to be a Christian when your family is not, can lead to the dinner table ding-dongs we talked about earlier.

Jesus faced rejection in Jerusalem and the disciples can expect no less. But rather than see rejection and conflict as signs of defeat, we are asked to see them as part of the divine plan. It makes us ask questions of ourselves, like what does it mean to be a Christian? It is always going to set us apart.

There will be conflict. The *Voice to Parliament*³ debate will divide many. We need to be able to interpret divine justice in our current time. As the passage

² Sadly the Royal Commission Against Child Abuse exposed a similar culture in churches.

³ Pauline Hanson's party raced to register over 40 domain names such as *Statement from the heart, voice to Parliament, the Uluru Statement*, which is called cyber squatting and designed to take the voice away from the

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He is, of course, speaking about other Americans and it is unclear if he has read the Bible. The "fight" is over documents that belong to the government and this kind of flies in the face of separation of church and state as Jesus was explaining in Matthew 22:15-22 Paying taxes to Caesar...

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Trump may be a little confused about who is God.

The images of a vineyard in Isaiah are supposed to communicate the careful tilling and nurturing God has devoted to his people. The people are begging for restoration. I have said many times in the past, the true definition of repentance is not feeling sorry for yourself, it is change...and in a strange way, Isaiah is asking God to repent, to change and accept and forgive the people so that their relationship with the Divine might be restored. In contrast, the repentance called for in the Hebrews and Luke readings are the other way around.

Psalm 80 speaks of such abundance and care...but when we get to line 12, the question, "why have you broken down its walls...?" goes unanswered. We are left to assume God is punishing Israel for its sins... but there is no confession here. Rather, the writer pleads with God to repent, to turn, to change back into the loving Divine parent we once knew. The complainant puts it all in God's hands to act.

Not to be too flippant but I'd like to digress to dog training – you heard that right, dog training and yes, I am dyslexic. Toddler training and dog training are not all that different. When I was young, we trained dogs with rolled up newspapers and loud voices. By the 90s, this was seen as animal cruelty and training turned to treats. When a dog did something right, you rewarded. The belief was, they would do right for rewards. Aside from the bribery and bargaining this engendered in toddlers, as a dog obedience technique, it too was abandoned because they found that dogs (and surprisingly children) love to be loved. So, training turned to love on – and love off. When they did something right, you lavished them with affection. When they do something wrong, you turn your back and withhold warmth.¹ (we're still taking about dogs.)

¹ Personally, I think this is crueller than the rolled-up newspaper but that is just my opinion.

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says, we can read the clouds and the rain, we need to learn how to read justice in our time.

We cannot remain blind to what is happening in our midst. Commonsense says that we should settle our arguments before going to court and risking everything. Commonsense says we have to change and we have to drive change before the ultimate judgement.

This passage is **not** comforting for those seeking safety and security. The Bible is not a neat wall we can throw up to keep ugliness out. The Good News is that the Jesus story shows that judgement is not the last word, that destruction is not inevitable and even when it happens, that is **not** the end of the story.

To be a disciple or a whistle-blower is uncomfortable. You are breaking down barriers. It will cause conflict. It is also a damned-if-you-do AND damned-if-you-don't situation. You cannot live as a Christian and not speak out. If you speak out, you will wear the consequences. It is not God you are calling on to change but you and the world around you. First, you have to deconstruct the walls you have built around yourself. People may steal your grapes.

Consistently present Lord, I hate conflict, Make me a brave disciple at peace with myself. Amen

legitimate owners. Division has begun. [Pauline Hanson secures website domains after auDA review | news.com.au — Australia's leading news site](#) see also SMH article.

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